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NEWS

Contact: Vicki Woodard (csvns@eiu.edu)
Melinda Matthews (csmem2@eiu.edu)
217-581-7650
217-581-8444 (fax)

Office of Media Relations
600 Lincoln Avenue
Room 2142 Old Main
Charleston, IL 61920-3099
(www.eiu.edu/~pubaff/omr.htm)

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For Immediate Release:

EIU/IDOC PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS "STUDENTS" FROM BOTH AGENCIES

CHARLESTON – At first glance, it might not appear as if the two Illinois agencies have much in common.

However, when Eastern Illinois University recently partnered with the Illinois Department of Corrections, they did so with a common goal – the furtherance and enhancement of education.

With the Fall 2003 semester, Eastern students living on campus will begin seeing new furniture appear in their residence hall rooms. What some may not realize is that the furniture was built by IDOC inmates, most of whom reside at the Graham Correctional Center, a medium security prison located in Hillsboro.

"We'll probably have 35 inmates or more assigned to this project," said Brad Sassatelli, acting CEO of Illinois Correctional Industries. "This is really a great opportunity for us."

For years, ICI has operated factories, farms and service programs at 19 of its facilities throughout the state. The enterprises currently employ approximately 1,100 men and women inmates who volunteer to do the work, thus learning usable skills and positive work habits that help them prepare for post-release employment. The inmates also receive a minor amount of pay for their work, which is often sent home to their families.

"The majority of our inmates are going to be released eventually," Sassatelli said. "If we can help them learn a skill and to change their destructive behavior, we can send them home and to their families with a lower chance of their return to prison down the road."

ICI, a self-supporting program that does not rely on tax dollars, produces products and services ranging from traditional/contemporary wood and metal furniture to food products. It also produces a wide selection of men's and women's garments, silk-screen/embroidery, a complete range of maintenance supplies and eyeglasses.

Some inmates even train service dogs for disabled individuals, Sassatelli added.

State statute defines those entities which may purchase from ICI, and those include the State, its political units, its agencies and public institutions.

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As one of those chosen few, Eastern, which has purchased office furniture from ICI in the past, asserts its satisfaction with both the quality of the furniture it has received and "service after the sale." It seemed natural to approach ICI about residence hall furniture, as well.

According to Mark Hudson, director of Eastern's Office of Housing and Dining Services, the current furniture located in the university's residence halls is original, some dating back 40 years or more. The pieces offer little-to-no flexibility as far as placement goes – a trait that has bothered students using it.

"There's not much you can do to make a room bigger," Hudson said, "but you can maximize the space."

He noted, too, that a recent student satisfaction survey indicated that 61 percent of students living in residence halls would be willing to pay increased housing fees if it meant getting more up-to-date and versatile furniture. Such furniture would help induce a greater number of students to stay on campus rather than get off-campus apartments, he added.

Sassatelli recalled that Eastern approached ICI to ask whether or not inmates could make the type of furniture the university was interested in.

"We've been making furniture for a long time," he said, "so when we saw what Eastern wanted, we were able to put some ideas together."

Eastern officials were greatly pleased with what ICI came up with. The modular furniture of solid oak (not particle board) construction featured beds, desks and dressers of a uniform height and width, allowing its users to easily stack and position each piece in a variety of arrangements. Allowing the beds to be bunked and/or lofted is a critical feature of the new furniture, something that the current furniture does not allow.

In addition, the pieces are "pinned" into position, thereby eliminating any unwanted chance of separation.

ICI delivered prototypes of the furniture to campus, allowing student representatives of Eastern's Residence Hall Association the opportunity to try it out. According to Hudson, students were delighted with the experience and endorsed the project with a unanimous vote.

The two agencies have now entered into a 10-year agreement that will allow Eastern to purchase up to \$6 million in furniture and replace all the furniture in nearly 4,000 residence hall rooms.

Cost-wise, ICI's furniture is comparable, if not a little lower, than commercial dealers, said Monty Bennett, Eastern's director of purchasing. However, the university can even bypass the bidding process since state procurement rules allow the university to do so when ICI is the source of supply.

The partnership allows the two agencies to keep state money within the state system, while also drawing attention to ICI's capabilities.

"It's going to help us get our name out there," Sassatelli said. "And the more work we do within the state system, the more money we have for the education of our inmates."

"It really is a win-win situation," Hudson said.